

Lucas Whitman

English 122, section 016

Miss French

February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011

### Tying Off That Dinosaur Tonight...

Novelist and former junkie Gregory David Roberts describes heroin as “a sensory deprivation tank for the soul.” Within the walls of the addict's high there exist “no feelings of guilt or grief, no depression and no desire” (630). How fitting then that the nineties grunge band Nirvana takes its name from the Buddhist concept that embodies the desireless? Desire is the source of all suffering according to the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, and the elimination of this human desire is considered one of the primary goals of Buddha-hood. Now we've all experienced the pangs of sadness, but how viscous must these feelings be to make some risk their very lives to escape them? Does the need for transcendence stem from the sensitivity to the events in the lives of the users? Are their reds more “red,” their blues more “blue?” What is it in the ether of the human condition that some seem to perceive with such clarity, and from whither stems the ability of certain musicians to distill this ether into sound? One begins to wonder whether heroin is a catalyst for the addict artist's creativity, or if their addiction is simply a by-product of the emotional fulcrum that their talent has become.

The Wikipedia entry on heroin shows that historically this chemical descendant of the opium poppy was used to treat a wide variety of common ailments including coughing. Originally touted by the pharmaceutical distributor Bayer as a “non-addictive” substitute to Morphine, it was eventually criminalized by Congress in 1924. Pharmacological naiveté may have allowed this substance to slip

quietly into American life. Opium traces its roots in America to immigrants from China in the early 1800's. As the railroads made their way across the nation so did the opium (*Opium*). And from the projects where these workers lived great music has often sprung.

Heroin's influence can be seen all across America in all genres of music and it does not limit itself by decade or race. Jazz greats such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Jon Coltrane have reportedly been users and addicts. Though Miles Davis influenced American Jazz and is considered one of the greatest trumpet players of his genre, he nearly died from his addiction, even going so far as running a ring of call girls to find the money to feed his addiction (Scherer). Across the genre gap, country star Johnny Cash, a known addict as well, also spent many years fighting addiction. Mervin Hester, in his article "The Drug Addiction Story of Johnny Cash", attributes his struggles with heroin to the stress of touring and the pressure of being a professional musician. Without a doubt heroin has had an influence on his music. The raw emotion in Cash's voice in the midst of his cover of fellow addict Trent Reznor's "Hurt" bears witness to the impact the drug had on both his personal life and his musical career. The monophonic melody is reflective of the solitary life of the addict. The repeated minor chords in the background of the chorus reflect the bars of Cash's psychological prison. As Cash reminisces on all his addiction has cost him, the world weariness in his voice is beyond real to the listener.

By the late sixties we saw such greats as Jerry Garcia and Janis Joplin succumb to addiction as well. *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rock Stars* reports that Janis Joplin was found dead in her California hotel room in 1970 by her manager John Cooke. This overdose was her sixth, and unfortunately her last. The heroin she had shot into her arm that night was reported to be over twenty times purer than the normal drug found on the street (Simmonds 41). This purity increased the potency of the drug giving the star a dose that was many times her usual fix. Joplin is arguably one of the most influential and soulful female vocalists of the century, and her hit "Piece of My Heart" with Big Brother and The Holding Company is brimming with unbridled emotion. In Joplin's voice we once again hear the return

of the minor melodies, this time with the addition of the blue notes and a pentatonic leaning. Her voice, reflecting Cash's, is raw and unbridled as if the music is being scraped off of her very soul. The rampant drug abuse in the 1960's, in hindsight, make it seem that the life of being a rock star was not all glitter and glam. Indeed the accessibility of heroin and widespread nature of its use is testament of the dual nature of stardom.

As the 1960's faded and the hard rock scene began to grow in southern California, the styles may have changed, but the habits did not. The laundry list of rockers suffering from heroin addiction is encyclopedic. Guns N' Roses and Mötley Crüe being two of the most prominent. The band Guns N' Roses has been described as a band of , “evil, penniless junkies who stole from groupies and lived on biscuits” prior to their success with the album *Appetite for Destruction* (Elliot). After their success they may not have had to survive on biscuits or steal from groupies, but their appetite for their own destruction seems only to have increased. Mötley Crüe drummer Nikki Sixx, also a ravenous heroin addict, once overdosed after being injected by his drug dealer. After awakening in the hospital he reportedly hitched a ride home where he immediately got high again on his home stash and was returned to the hospital due to a subsequent overdose immediately after his release (Simmonds 198). This event inspired the hit, “Kickstart My Heart” released in nineteen eighty-nine on their album *Dr. Feelgood*. The whole glam rock scene was infused with heroin and inspired the *heroin-chic* fashion that pervaded the late eighties and early nineties. It's hard to tell if these macho rock stars used this excessive lifestyle as a cover up for the emotional turmoil that they were unable to express, but addiction never seems to travel alone and the addiction is often a symptom of deeper issues.

As the early nineties grunge scene developed the pervasiveness of heroin in the world of music became even more apparent. While such mainstream acts as Alice and Chains and Nirvana did not even bother to hide their habits, they were also more transparent as to the reasons for their abuse. The music of this scene was less about rock and roll excess and more about personal trauma and angst. In the lyrics of these musicians, indeed even in the musical compositions the anguish is an ever-present motif.

Music columnist Jeff Miers explains, "Grunge had a low survival rate." Major players such as Kurt Cobain and Layne Staley lost their lives, and numerous others lost their health and well-being. The breakup of Stone Temple Pilots is often attributed to the front man Scott Weiland's heavy habit, and the demise of Jane's Addiction is rumored to stem from similar conflicts between the vocalist Perry Farrell and the other members of the band. We see deeper issues contributing to the cause of the addiction when we look into the personal lives of these musicians. In his biography on Kurt Cobain, Charles R. Cross quotes Cobain as saying that after five long years of chronic stomach pain he was, "literally insane... as schizophrenic as a wet cat that's been beaten." (301) His addiction it seems, if not a direct response to this pain, was certainly sustained as a way to escape this very real physical anguish. Cobain was openly suicidal both in his music and in conversations with friends and family. His journals reveal a depression that is palpable, and a man that felt misunderstood. Cobain wrote, "The most violating thing I've felt this year is not the media exaggerations or the catty gossip, but the rape of my personal thoughts. Ripped out of pages from my stay in hospitals and airplane rides hotel stays etc. I feel compelled to say fuck you. Fuck you to those of you who have absolutely no regard for me as a person. You have raped me harder than you'll ever know." (*Journals*). In Cobain's case we begin to see that it isn't necessarily the heroin that is producing the creativity, rather the emotional turmoil writhing inside that inspires his lyrics and vocal tone. The heroin seems to act as a crutch that helps them to deal with both physical and emotional pain.

As the second decade of the twenty-first century begins and what's fashionable in music continues to change, we can be assured that the habits won't. Heroin will continue to affect the music we love, and what we must realize is that it isn't the drugs that make the musician. It seems that we often find creativity in the hands of those who aren't necessarily the most well-adjusted to normal society. The people who live on an emotional edge seem to be the most eloquent when it comes to communicating in the language of that plane. Greek philosopher Plato once said that "He who approaches the temple of the Muses without inspiration, in the belief that craftsmanship alone suffices,

will remain a bungler and his presumptuous poetry will be obscured by the songs of the maniacs."

Clearly when it comes to the modern-day romanticism that we see in popular music this seems to be true. The difficulty we face as a society lies in finding another way for these creative individuals to cope with their tumultuous lives without the disastrous consequences inherent in heroin use. Finding other, more effective ways for these musicians to cope with their emotional issues could very well take away the turmoil that is their inspiration. But can we begrudge them finding a new lease on life?

Certainly not. Peter Kramer, a professor of psychiatry is feels that America has a "propensity for romanticizing depression" and that "Our beliefs, our art, our sense of self might change... If we could treat depression reliably, we would have different artists, different subjects, different stories, different needs, different tastes" (Miller). For in the end, "Junkies kill desire with the same weapon they use on hope and dream and honor: the club made from their craving" (Roberts 630) and eventually we lose these bright stars either to their addiction, or to their recovery.

## Works Cited

- Cobain, Kurt. *Journals*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003. Print.
- Cross, Charles R. *Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain*. New York: Hyperion, 2001. Print.
- Elliot, Paul. "Guns N' Roses – The Scum Also Rises." *Q*. Issue 208. November 2003. Web. 13 February 2011.
- Hester, Mervin. "The Drug Addiction Story of Johnny Cash." *Article Base*. 03 November 2009. Web. 02 February 2011.
- Miers, Jeff. "The road less traveled: Pearl Jam plays on its own terms." *Buffalo News, The (NY)* 08 May 2010: *Newspaper Source*. EBSCO. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.
- Miller, Laura. "Van Gogh on Prozac." *Salon*. 23 May 2005. Web. 21 February 2011.
- "Opium." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition* (2010): 1. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 12 Feb. 2011.
- Roberts, Gregory D. *Shantaram: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. Print.
- Scherer, Bill. "Sugar Ray Robinson and Miles Davis." *Suite 101*. 28 October 2007. Web. 13 February 2011.
- Simmonds, Jeremy. *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rock Stars: Heroin, Handguns, and Ham Sandwiches*. Chicago, Ill: Chicago Review Press, 2008. Print.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Heroin." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 4 Feb. 2011. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.